

US-British Tensions Over Afghan Occupation

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In-depth Report: [AFGHANISTAN](#)

The Times of London recently carried a series of highly critical comments by senior US officials in regard to the deployment of British forces in southern Afghanistan from 2006 onwards. The candid statements express longstanding tensions between the two powers.

Michael Evans, Pentagon correspondent for the Times, revealed, "When senior Pentagon officials paid a visit to London not long before the British deployment to Helmand, they came with a recommendation that the planned force might not be strong enough. Their words went unheeded.

"The American view was that a brigade of only 3,300 soldiers would not be sufficient to take on the Taleban and that the British were being complacent about the capability of the enemy."

Eric Edelman, former Under Secretary of Defense for Policy in the Bush administration, met with officials from the British Ministry of Defence (MoD). He comments, "I remember going to London and saying it would be good to have more troops, but I was told that Britain couldn't add more until they were out of Iraq.

"The MoD made clear that they had done plenty and that France, Spain and others needed to step up first," he said.

Edelman said he was surprised about the tactics adopted by the British in Helmand, especially the decision to set up "platoon houses" in which soldiers found themselves fighting round the clock against insurgents in remote isolated places.

"When the troops arrived they kept putting small units into isolated places and there was a bit of a surprise that it was like Custer's last stand.

"We tried to be understanding and not to pressurise the British too much but we ended up having to provide many of the 'enablers' [support equipment such as helicopters and intelligence back-up]," he said.

Lieutenant-General David Barno, commander of US forces in Afghanistan from 2003 to 2005, also indicated the platoon houses as a weakness: "One of the things that hurt the British was the decision to send out very small units expecting to work among a friendly or neutral population with a limited enemy threat. The reality proved to be much different."

Andrew Krepinevich, who served on the personal staff of three US defense secretaries and is a former US Army officer, said he was surprised by the complacent approach of both the UK

and NATO, telling the Times, “It’s hard to see what was in their mind at the time. There was clearly a gross underestimate of the threat then posed by the Taleban in Helmand. Just because the Taleban were relatively quiet, that didn’t mean they had been pacified.

“But of course as soon as more than 3,000 British troops arrived, they stirred up a hornet’s nest. Then the resources that the British had assigned to the operation turned out to be substantially inadequate for the task.”

Anonymously, a former Pentagon adviser on Afghanistan said he believed that British and other NATO units were sent to Afghanistan lacking proper logistical support, and that there had been “a state of denial” in NATO about the situation in the south of the country: “The trouble is there was a stabilization, peacekeeping mentality,” he said. “It was the wrong paradigm.”

The Times reported, “American military and diplomatic officials believe that a disastrous intelligence failure early in 2006 incorrectly persuaded both Britain and the rest of NATO that the Taleban were defeated and no longer posed a threat in southern Afghanistan. Warning signs late in 2005 that violence was on the increase in Helmand were ignored, because ‘no one wanted to send bad news up the chain.’”

The paper concluded with Edelman saying, “I don’t point the finger at the British; everyone got it wrong. It was seen to be a reconstruction and stabilization operation, not a full-scale insurgency. [The US] used to get pummelled for causing civilian casualties, but often it was because British and other NATO troops were over-exposed and calling up for air support, which we had to provide.”

Despite the attempts at damage limitation—by the appearance of General David Petraeus at a June 9 conference of the Royal United Services Institute in London to acknowledge the contribution of UK forces—the fault lines are apparent. The appearance of such open recriminations between the US and UK military forces is rare, but increasingly evident.

In 2008, US generals criticised British-backed plans to arm local militias in the south of the country to aid them in defeating the insurgency. More significant was the publication of documents in November 2009 revealing disputes between the British military establishment and their US counterparts over the handling of the invasion and occupation of Iraq. A major reason for the re-surfacing of tensions in Iraq was the drive by rival imperialist powers to secure their share of lucrative construction contracts, in the face of US efforts to monopolize them.

The worsening problems besetting the US-led occupation of Afghanistan, the increasing scope of the insurgency, the rising civilian and troop fatalities, the growth of domestic opposition to the war and the potentially bloody struggle for lucrative mining contracts for the recently “discovered” mineral deposits across the country are all set to further intensify inter-imperialist rivalries.

Despite Prime Minister David Cameron’s demands that the public “revere and support” the troops so they can later go home with “heads held high,” during his recent visit to Camp Bastion, the reality remains that his government is prosecuting a deeply unpopular neo-colonialist war that is escalating in violence and casualties. On Monday it was announced that the number of British military personnel killed on operations in Afghanistan since the

US-led invasion in 2001 had reached 300. The 300th fatality died in Birmingham's New Queen Elizabeth Hospital after he had been wounded in a blast in the Sangin district of Helmand on June 12. Of these casualties, 55 have died within the first six months of 2010.

The Observer June 20 quoted analysis by the Medical Research Council's biostatistics unit at the University of Cambridge that says the rate at which British soldiers have been killed in Afghanistan is almost four times that of their US counterparts, and double the rate that is officially classified as "major combat." The death rate of UK troops is twice that of 2006 when major deployment to Helmand province first began. There has also been a spike in the number of British soldiers killed by gunfire as opposed to roadside bombs.

The head of the United Nations monitoring mission on the Taleban recently criticized attempts by British and American forces to expand their control over Afghan territory over the past 12 months as having been counterproductive and worsening the security situation. The UN statement has been viewed as particularly directed at the recent assessment of the British MoD and its announced "progress" in Helmand.

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